

Anna Rüling: Lesbian Fiction and a Short History of German Sexology

Research Thesis

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by

Sarah McCaslin

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Project Advisor: Professor Matthew Birkhold

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## Biographical Information

For most of recent history, Anna Rüling and Theo Anna Sprüngli existed as two separate people. The former was known for her advocacy for the rights of people known in German as both the “*homosexuelle Frau*” (homosexual woman) and the *urninde*, while the latter wrote reviews of plays and published articles in local newspapers. The connection between the two women wasn’t made until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when scholar Christine Leidinger noticed a discrepancy with the name of the author of the speech “*Welche Interesse hat die Frauenbewegung an der Lösung des Homosexuellen Problems?*” (“*What Interest does the Women’s Movement have in the Homosexual Question?*”) did the investigation begin. Listed in the *Jahrbücher für sexuelle Zwischenstufe* (Yearbook for Sexual Intermediate Stages) as Anna Rüling, but named Th. Rüling in a conference report for the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitären Komitee* (Scientific Humanitarian Committee) meeting by *das neue Magazin* (The New Magazine), this discrepancy made it clear that Rüling was used as a pseudonym for Sprüngli by taking away the “sp” at the beginning and rearranging the remaining letters.

Some of the more specific details into the life and publications of Theo Sprüngli are hard to come by due to incomplete city records, conflicting documentation, and lack of supporting documents.

Theodora “Theo” Anna Sprüngli (Anna Rüling), was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1880 in Hamburg to a Swiss family. At the age of 17 she began writing for the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* (Hamburg Foreign Paper), which started her career in journalism and writing. She wrote for the anarchist newspaper *der Kampf* (the Struggle), which proclaimed to be a “forum for free movements of whatever kind.” She wrote two articles for the Hamburg-based newspaper in the spring of 1904, one of which profiled? [just to avoid repetition of word ‘write’] Gertrud Eysoldt, an actress who would later become known for her work in German film. This article might be seen as the beginning of her focus on arts and culture. In October of the same year, Rüling gave her speech at a conference hosted by the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitären Komitee* (Scientific Humanitarian Committee). She highlighted the struggles of “*urninde*” within the women’s movement and questioned the exclusion of such women from partaking in debates on women’s rights. “*Bei diesen Reformbestrebungen darf die Frauenbewegung nicht vergessen, wie viel Schuld die falsche Bewertung der homosexuellen Frau an den unfreundlichen Zuständen trägt; ich sage ausdrücklich „wie viel Schuld,“ es liegt mir selbstverständlich fern, dieser falschen Bewertung etwa die ganze Schuld aufbürden zu wollen.*” (“With these attempts at reform, the women’s movement cannot forget how much to blame the false assessment of the homosexual women for these unfriendly situations; I say explicitly “how much to blame,” naturally it seems to me far-fetched to impose this whole guilt on the false assessments.”) Rüling here discusses the relationship between the women’s movement and how the mischaracterization of *urninde* is partially to blame from the women’s movement.

Two years after her speech, Rüling published her collection of thirteen short stories, *Welcher Unter Uns ohne Sünde ist: Bücher von der Schattenseite* (Who Among Us is Without Sin: Stories from the Shady Side) with the Max Spohr Verlag in Leipzig: three are stories centered around the lives of female

homosexuals with happy endings and two stories feature same-sex male relationships. This is the only collection of short stories Rüling published. The three stories focused on female homosexuals are titled *Die Mondscheinsonate* (*Moonlight Sonata*), *Rätselhaft* (*Mystery*), and *Der Kofferträger* (*The Suitcase Carrier*).

Max Spohr was a co-founder of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, the host of the event where Anna Rüling gave her 1904 speech. His press, founded in 1881, began to focus on gay liberation texts in 1893. Notable publications include *The Urning on Trial* and *Disinherited from the Happiness of Love* (*Die Enterben des Liebesgluckes* 1893), both written by Otto de Joux, alongside Rüling's short stories.

Sprüngli only published the speech for the WhK and her collection of short stories under her pseudonym, likely to preserve her reputation and credibility; all other publications are under her family name.

Sprüngli soon abandoned the pseudonym. From 1905 to 1908, she worked in Berlin for Scherl Publishing, which worked with the two biggest newspapers in Berlin at the time: *der Tag* (*The Day*) and *Berliner Tages-Anzeiger* (*Berlin Daily Gazette*). Thereafter, the writer spent at least thirty years in Düsseldorf and published a book about music titled *Das deutsche Volkslied. Kurze Darstellung*. (*The German Folksong: A Short Representation*). Sprüngli also wrote for the *neue Deutsche Frauen-Zeitung* (*New German Women's Newspaper*), which represented the views of the Deutscher Frauenklub (German Women's Club). Her articles focused on musical and cultural events in and around Düsseldorf, such as theatrical news, travel updates, and music and book reviews. In 1922 she began writing for the *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten* (*Düsseldorf News*) and the *Düsseldorfer Lokal-Zeitung* (*Düsseldorf Local Newspaper*).

The focus of most of Sprüngli's work was music, theater, and the arts, and the intent with her work was to preserve German culture. She wrote an article for the *Neue Deutsche Frauen-Zeitung* based on a trip she took to the front lines of the war where she praised the way the soldiers took German culture with them and would impart that culture onto the conquered enemy. "The greatest, however, was that we were able to take with us the certainty that German culture, of which even the German theatrical arts is a part, powerfully stands in the storm of warring times and will carry its blessings into the conquered enemy country. German culture, protected by the German sword—is there a more beautiful, a more hopeful image?" (*Das Größte aber war doch, daß wir die Gewißheit mit uns fortnehmen durften, daß die deutsche Kultur, von der ja auch die deutsche Bühnenkunst ein Teil ist, kraftvoll dasteht im Sturm kriegerischer Zeiten und ihre Segnungen bis in das eroberte feindliche Land trägt. Die deutsche Kunst beschützt vom deutschem Schwert—gibt es ein schöneres, hoffnungsvolleres Bild?*)

Sprüngli was a secretary for the Düsseldorf chapter of the organization *Flottesbundes deutscher Frauen* (German Women's Navy League), whose goal was to aid the *Deutschen Flottenverein* (German Navy Association). The German Women's Navy League was the female group of the *Deutsch Kolonialgesellschaft* (German Colonial Society) and supported foreign policy with an emphasis of enlarging Germany's presence on the world stage. After the end of the war, it is unknown if Sprüngli remained a member of this group. Similarly, her membership in other groups is uncertain, but she was not brought into nationalist groups because of World War One; her speech given to the WhK contains

nationalist rhetoric that was common at the time. For instance, Sprüngli often mentions the *Vaterland* (*Fatherland*) in the context of bringing peace and furthering the progress of the country.

Sprüngli's political affiliations during Nazi Germany are unclear as well; she used her political affiliations to participate in the *Reichsmusikkammer* (Reich Chamber of Music) as a music critic and music author, and joined the *Reichsverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (Union of German Authors). Joining the RDS was mandatory as of December 10th 1933 but the association was dissolved in 1935 by pressure from the Department of Propaganda and the members were listed in the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (German Professional Literature Chamber). Sprüngli was not a member of the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) and claimed to have no party affiliation prior to 1933. Toward the end of her life, Sprüngli was heavily involved with the theater and worked multiple positions within the field, including as a dramaturge and organizer of evening performances. After her death she was heralded as the oldest German female journalist.

## Historical Background

Although discussions of same-sex attraction have existed in Europe ever since Sappho's sexuality came into question, discourse flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as scientists, psychologists, politicians, and activists weighed in with new vigor on the nature of homosexuality. Multiple terms were used to describe those attracted to people of the same sex: *urning* (male) and *urninde* (female) coined by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, based on Venus Urania, representative of the goddess's spiritual side in contrast to her physical self; and *homosexual* coined in 1869 by Austro-Hungarian activist and journalist Karl Maria Kertbeny. In addition to developing a new vocabulary, these men penned pamphlets advocating for the decriminalization of Paragraph 175, the German Empire's anti-sodomy law, and these publications are often cited as the start of the homosexual movement in Central Europe.

Napoleon, however, is indirectly responsible for much of the nineteenth-century discussion. France decriminalized sodomy in 1791 and as a result, when the French emperor imported the Napoleonic Code (1804) to the countries he conquered, the tolerant law followed. Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium all decriminalized sodomy by 1848, as had many German states. Yet some German states held fast to their anti-sodomy laws, most notably Prussia in its Paragraph 175. When the German states unified and Prussia became the de facto leader, its laws were imported throughout the country. Consequently, sodomy became illegal throughout all of Germany.

Although sexual acts between men were deemed illegal by paragraph 175, the law changed to allow for the publication of works around homosexual men. The Imperial Press Law of 1874 allowed for freedom of the press under the condition that editors were responsible for what was published in their newspapers and journals. The implementation of the Imperial Press Law allowed for many books and pamphlets about the lives of homosexuals to be printed, and this led to over a thousand published works by and for homosexuals, along with scientific research published by sexologists, or scientists who study sexuality. Max Spohr, publisher of Anna Rüling's short stories, eventually went to court over the gay liberation texts he published for obscenity charges.

Life in Germany for homosexuals was vibrant. There were baths, restaurants, and hotels where one could take a companion of the same sex for a fee. People hosted balls, attracting hundreds of guests in their best dress; there were bars that catered to homosexual desires; and newspapers and specialized

queer journals were full of personal ads. The idea that homosexuals could live in peace with their neighbors was popular at the time.

As the new science of “sexology” emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so did the way people viewed homosexuality. Was homosexuality a disease or is it inborn? How should we define someone who is attracted to a person of the same sex? How does it stand morally? Karl Heinrich Ulrichs believed that biologists would one day find a germ that caused homosexuality. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a leading sexologist and physician, thought that being an *Urnig* was a mental disorder. He published his studies on Urnings and the book was so well-received that other Urnings would send him their stories and hope that he would publish them in order to further the research into the phenomenon of homosexuality.

At the time, sexology was a male-dominated field and its findings were highly contested, particularly by those involved with the women’s movement. Conservative male sexologists used their research to argue against women’s rights and sovereignty by providing new and modern ways to maintain and regulate life, and for many of those men, women were simply objects that needed to be managed. As a result, women increasingly wanted an opportunity to partake to ensure that the science wasn’t being used against them. By using science and research, there was a better chance of replacing ignorance with enlightenment.

In the same way that Krafft-Ebing’s publication provided a sense of solidarity and an opportunity for someone to listen and relate to other’s struggles, Rüling’s fiction provides the same solace. This work was written in a time when there wasn’t much, if any, published fiction aimed at *urninden*. *Welcher Unter Uns Ohne Sünde Ist* gave audiences stories that they could relate to, and the happy endings told them there were opportunities for happiness within their lives, despite the fact that society and their families weren’t happy with their lifestyles. Many would be asked about future spouses relentlessly and considered death preferable to being forced into a marriage with someone they were not attracted to. Many people would choose to be unhappy in marriages with someone of the other sex that they weren’t attracted to, while others found this idea revolting and would rather commit suicide than partake in the traditional idea of marriage. Specifically, this topic is addressed in the story *Rätselhaft*. These stories told them they weren’t alone.

## Story Background

The texts that follow are intended for students at an A2/B1 level. They are written in the simple past (*Präteritum*), contain straightforward sentence structure, and have accessible vocabulary. Specialized and archaic words have been glossed to provide an easier experience for these learners. These words might have strange forms in the simple past or describe specific actions or feelings that the student might not have come across in their everyday vocabulary.

Within Rüling’s collection of short stories, three focus on so-called *urninde*. The longest, *Der Kofferträger*, is approximately fifteen pages and the other two stories, *die Mondscheinsonate* and *Rätselhaft*, are concise narratives of two and eight pages, respectively, and show two different ways that narratives featuring *urninde*. *Die Mondscheinsonate* provides a happy end with the two women loving each other with a positive tone whereas *Rätselhaft* has a tragic ending that gives hope to the narrator and the reader. *Rote Rosen* has also been added to the collection because it provides a similar sense of relationships that are better kept behind closed doors due to the social mores imposed by society. While

not explicitly about female homosexuals, it does touch on prostitution, which was also considered taboo at the time the stories were written.

*Die Mondscheinsonate* tells the story of a young woman named Hanna von Bergen who believes her love for another woman, Charlotte, isn't reciprocated and plays a love song for her in front of an open window. Charlotte is outside, and the two confess their love for each other. This love is seen as fulfilling to Hanna, who had been considering ending her life before the exchange of feelings between the girls.

*Rätselhaft* tells the story of a woman, Käthe, who has committed suicide after her family forcibly split her from her girlfriend. She sends a letter to her friend, the narrator, explaining why she's committed suicide. Not only did she feel alienated from other girls due to her disinterest in more "feminine" hobbies, she also was not interested in being romantically involved with any of the men who courted her. She found true happiness after meeting a girl at a park, but when her parents found out about their relationship, they were forcibly separated, and she could no longer stand to live in such an intolerant world.

*Rote Rosen* tells the story of a nameless, ungendered narrator meeting with a woman, likely a prostitute, behind closed doors. The meeting the two have is discreet and after their rendezvous, the narrator questions the way society views women who sell their bodies. In the time this story was written, prostitution was prevalent in both heterosexual and homosexual communities, and it's possible the narrator could have been involved with someone of the same sex.

I've chosen to exclude *der Kofferträger* due to the length of the story. It isn't unmanageable at fifteen pages, but I've intended for these stories to be more focused around classroom discussion and fostering open conversation between students.

These stories raise important questions for students to consider about homosexual women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: why was death preferable to entering a loveless marriage? Is the desperate feeling experienced by the protagonists a thing of the past? How do these stories paint society at the time? Discussion questions following each story will prompt students think critically about the texts and form ideas about contemporary similarities and differences to the social mores of the early 1900s.

## Further Reading

For more information about...

- Anna Rüling
  - "Anna Rüling: A Problematic Foremother of Lesbian Herstory" by Christiane Leidinger <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704535>
  - "Theo-Anna Sprüngli (1880-1953), besser bekannt als „Anna Rüling“. Berühmte Berliner Rednerin, Kulturjournalistin, Ulmer Schauspielleiterin und Theaterdramaturgin" by Christiane Leidinger <https://www.lsbttiq-bw.de/2016/12/16/theo-anna-spruengli-1880-1953-besser-bekannt-als-anna-rueling-beruehmte-berliner-rednerin-kulturjournalistin-ulmer-schauspielleiterin-und-theaterdramaturgin/>

- “Welches Interesse hat die Frauenbewegung an der Lösung des Homosexuellen Problems?” by Anna Rüling  
<https://www.angelfire.com/fl3/uraniamanuscripts/annadt.html>
- Women and Literature during this timeframe
  - *Sexual Politics and Feminist Science* by Kirsten Leng
  - *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era 1770-1820* by Helen Fronius
- Gender and Sexuality
  - “The German Invention of Sexuality” by Robert Beachy
  - “Why Queer German History?” by Jennifer Evans
  - *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* by Thomas Lacquer
  - *Peripheral Desires: the German Discovery of Sex* by Deam Tobin